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**Foreign degree students of UAS Seinäjoki Business
School:**

Motives for choosing Finland and UAS Seinäjoki

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Liiketalouden, yrittäjyyden ja ravitsemisalan yksikkö

Pienen ja keskisuuren yritystoiminnan liikkeenjohdon koulutusohjelma



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Thesis abstract

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This qualitative study concerning about the foreign degree students of UAS Seinäjoki Business School was assigned by, and conducted for, the institution itself. Its purpose was to find out why and how the foreign degree students eventually chose Finland and Seinäjoki as their placement for studies, and where was the initial information about the university acquired from.

The economic internationalization of Southern Ostrobothnia has generated a need for qualified work force from the countries where Seinäjoki and its nearby regions are mostly connected to. In order to serve the region better, UAS Seinäjoki needs to attract the most motivated foreign students from these countries. Therefore it is necessary to know *why the current foreign degree students have chosen Finland and Seinäjoki as their placement for studies*. It was assumed that by interviewing these students, the key *influential factors* on their decisions to select Seinäjoki could be defined – and these could then be used to attract the most motivated foreign students to apply to the university and to move into the region.

In the qualitative interview the students were asked about their motives for choosing Finland and UAS Seinäjoki. Furthermore, the sources of information were covered. The results indicated that Finland was chosen mainly because of 1) *socio-economic reasons* (free education or dissatisfying conditions of homeland), 2) *recommendations* by relatives, and 3) *perceived opportunities* (an image of better professional opportunities). The results concerning the selection of UAS Seinäjoki were more unambiguous; nearly each respondent had randomly chosen the school from the list of Finnish universities. This indicates the school having no special image whatsoever outside Finland, and very little was known about the school before applying.

In the end, the students were still asked about the type of *higher education marketing* they consider the most effective in their own homeland. Additionally their opinions about *staying in Finland after graduation* were covered.

Keywords: degree students, higher education, motives, selection, Seinäjoki

SEINÄJOEN AMMATTIKORKEAKOULU

Opinnäytetyön tiivistelmä

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Tämä ulkomaalaisia tutkinto-opiskelijoita koskeva kvalitatiivinen tutkimus toteutettiin SeAMK Liiketoiminnan toimeksiannosta. Tarkoituksena oli selvittää miten ja miksi tutkittavat henkilöt olivat päätyneet Seinäjoen ammattikorkeakouluun, ja mistä tieto tästä korkeakoulusta oli alun perin saatu.

Tutkimus katsottiin ajankohtaiseksi Etelä-Pohjanmaan alueen kansainvälistymiskehityksen luoman tarpeen vuoksi. Seinäjoen ammattikorkeakoulun haasteena on houkutella enemmän motivoituneita hakijoita juuri niiltä maailman alueilta, joihin Etelä-Pohjanmaan yrityksillä eniten on kytköksiä. Siksi on ensin tiedettävä, miksi nykyiset ulkomaalaiset ovat valinneet Suomen ja Seinäjoen opiskelupaikakseen. Oletettiin, että SeAMK Liiketoiminnan nykyisiä ulkomaisia tutkinto-opiskelijoita tutkimalla löydetään sellaisia päätöksiin vaikuttavia tekijöitä, joilla motivoituneita ulkomaalaisia saadaan tulevaisuudessa kiinnostumaan Seinäjoen alueesta ja sen ammattikorkeakoulusta.

Haastatteleamalla tutkinto-opiskelijoilta kysyttiin Suomeen ja Seinäjoen ammattikorkeakouluun tulon syitä, sekä kartoitettiin tiedonlähteitä. Tuloksista havaittiin, että Suomeen tultiin pääasiassa *sosioekonomisista syistä* (ilmainen koulutus, lähtömaan elinolot), toiseksi vaikuttavin syy olivat *läheisten suositukset*, ja kolmanneksi *mielletty kuva* paremmista kouluttautumismahdollisuuksista ja uranäkymistä. Valinta koskien Seinäjoen ammattikorkeakoulua oli yksiselitteisempi: lähes jokainen oli valinnut korkeakoulun satunnaisesti heille tarjotusta Suomen korkeakoulujen listasta. Seinäjoen ammattikorkeakoululla ei siis tiedettävästi ole mitään erityistä vetovoimatekijää Suomen ulkopuolella, eikä korkeakoulusta juurikaan tiedetty mitään ennen hakuprosessia.

Lopuksi haastateltavilta kysyttiin vielä millainen korkeakoulumarkkinointi voisi toimia heidän kotimaassaan. Myös ajatukset Suomeen jäämisestä opiskelujen jälkeen kartoitettiin.

Avainsanat: tutkinto, opiskelija, ammattikorkeakoulu, valinta, Seinäjoki

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Used terms and abbreviations

brand	A name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors. Examples of brands: Google, Red Bull, Nike. (Kotler & Keller 2009, 276.)
cf.	Confer (<i>Latin</i>) = Compare with / refer to
e.g.	Exempli gratia (<i>Latin</i>) = for example
HE	Higher education
image	The perception of what a customer has of a certain product.
i.e.	Id est (<i>Latin</i>) = that is
marketing	An organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders (Kotler & Keller 2009, 45).
SeAMK	Seinäjoen ammattikorkeakoulu (UAS Seinäjoki)
UAS Seinäjoki	Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences (SeAMK)

1 PREFACE

Within the past 20 years Finnish society has become significantly international compared to what it has been until the early nineties. The constant change in the country's socioeconomic structure sets new demands and challenges for the national education system. Not only the structural change of population, but also the increasing internationalization of Finnish businesses and general globalization of economy generates a need for internationally capable workforce and experts.

Since the 1980's one key focus area for Finnish higher education policy has been the development of education through internationalization; increasing the mobility of students and teachers, establishing connections and co-operation with foreign education units and businesses, and thus support the mutual understanding between cultures. (Garam, I. 2005, 5.)

Higher education institutes belong to the international society of higher education institutes, where their tasks lie in producing knowledge (research), applying and diffusing knowledge (service functions) and conveying knowledge through education (education) (UAS Seinäjoki 2008, 5).

Each university of applied sciences has its own multiple roles in supporting the national and international professional demand, but locally their primary task is to educate the correct amount of people into proper fields of professions. The current challenge for Seinäjoki UAS Business School is to attract more foreign students from certain regions of the world in order to match to the regional demand. To deal successfully with this challenge, one must first know who these preferred people are, and how to attract them – this study is one of the first ones made in Seinäjoki covering this particular subject and approaches the dilemma by examining the current foreign degree students of UAS Seinäjoki Business School.

The introductory chapter gives an overview of the studied subject, explains the backgrounds and introduces the institution itself. The second chapter provides a theoretical framework for understanding the necessary influential factors concerning one's choice of university and going abroad for studies. It also includes a review to the formerly made studies about the motives for choosing Finland and

Seinäjoki UAS as the placement for studies. Third chapter describes the actual methods of research used in this study, followed by the results in chapter four. Final chapter provides conclusions and suggestions for future actions.

1.1 Research backgrounds and objectives

Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences has currently around 60 foreign students executing a full four-year bachelor's degree program in the school. The amount of 60 foreign degree students per year has been the annual standard throughout the recent years.

As mentioned above, one role of a university is to provide professional and suitable work force to support the local and nationwide need, and when it comes to educating foreign students – it is important to select the correct people according to the regional demand. In the case of Seinäjoki, the regional need has been roughly specified through a study (ground survey) conducted by the regional union of entrepreneurs (Etelä-Pohjanmaan Yrittäjät). The study indicates that the five most important export countries in 2008 and 2003 were Sweden, Norway, Russia, Estonia and Germany. The five most essential import countries were Germany, Sweden, Holland, China and Italy. (Tuuri et. al. 2008, 21; 36.)

When these results are compared to the current list of foreign degree students of UAS Seinäjoki; the represented countries are not serving the regional need very well. In order to serve the region better, a university must attract those prospects who are the most beneficial for it – but how to attract? This leads us to the actual problem of this research: no qualitative studies have been made before in order to find out the reasons *why the current foreign degree students have chosen UAS Seinäjoki and from where did they hear about this university?* Therefore there are two reasons for this study to be done:

- **Increasing awareness** and gaining information, which can be used for:
- **Future marketing purposes**

It is important to know why the current degree students have chosen UAS Seinäjoki, since the school isn't even actively marketed in most of the areas from where the students are actually coming from. It is not known what attracts these certain groups of people. It is also not known from where the information about the university was acquired by the students, and which factors mostly influenced their decision on applying to UAS Seinäjoki. If this all was known, the information could possibly be applied when marketing the university to the most wanted prospects. E.g. in practical terms; if an examined group from a certain region informs that "UAS Seinäjoki offers an interesting study program, which is not available in the given home country", then that would certainly be an advantage to know about it.

The original purpose of this study was to research the *motives behind choosing UAS Seinäjoki* by interviewing only those degree students who originate from these economically important countries mentioned in the ground survey. But since there are practically no students from these regions studying in UAS Seinäjoki at the moment, the current more specified aim of the study is described as below.

The aim of this study is to:

- *Find out the motives of foreign prospective students for choosing UAS Seinäjoki to complete a full diploma degree.*
- Bring out the reasons why prospective students chose Finland and Seinäjoki as their placement for studies, and whether there were any special reasons for selecting exactly Seinäjoki.
- Examine where the information about the university was acquired before the selection of the university was made.
- Additionally find out what type of marketing would be the most suitable in the respondents' own region (homeland), and whether the students are going to stay in Finland after graduation.

In a nutshell, the research is supposed to map the general impressions what foreign prospective students had of Seinäjoki, the university and the country before making the decision of applying to the school, and what influenced their decisions.

The study is to be conducted through themed *focus group interviews* of five groups of degree students from different regions of the world, but who are currently studying in UAS Seinäjoki.

1.2 Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences

Seinäjoki University of applied sciences is a tertiary education provider in the region of Southern Ostrobothnia, Finland. In addition to domestic and international research & development projects, the public institution provides education for over 4000 full time –students in 5 different municipalities and in 6 different branches. The branches include Culture & arts, Business & administration, Technology & transport, Health care & social work, Agriculture & forestry, and also Tourism & catering. The university offers two bachelor programs (Business, Nursing) and one master program (Business) completely in English. (SeAMK 2011, [referred: 24.5.2011].)

The Business School itself, for which this study is conducted for, is connected to numerous other universities around the world, and it is characterized by its international and entrepreneurial emphasize in education.

The vision for UAS Seinäjoki for its international activities in 2015 is described as following:

Seinäjoki UAS is a respected operator in the field of higher education and research and its international standard education, research and development activities as well as cooperation networks bring significant added value for students as well as companies and other organizations in the area (International strategy for UAS Seinäjoki 2008, 1).

2 INFLUENCES ON THE CHOICE OF UNIVERSITY

This chapter provides a theoretical framework for understanding the necessary influential factors concerning one's choice of university and going abroad for studies. It also includes a review to the formerly made studies about the motives for choosing Finland and Seinäjoki UAS as the placement for studies.

2.1 Higher education marketing

Each year universities are challenged into a competition to attract good prospective students. This, also known as enrollment management, is serious business and could be considered as an own field of science as well. Competitive pressure drives universities towards more proactive marketing in order to get to select the correct "customers". (Johnston, T. 2010, 5; Beneke, J. 2011,1.)

2.1.1 Marketisation of higher education

The private sector higher education management models have been developing over the last few decades to the direction of how today's corporations are run, wherein the student is seen as a customer purchasing academic education. Whether this is good for the education itself is debatable. Commercialization of education is most likely to lead into management of customer satisfaction, and since customers are ought to be satisfied no matter what, it questions the integrity of academics and teachers. (Molesworth et. al. 2011, 1-5.) Now this being slightly unrelated to the topic, it still resembles the general policies of today, especially in private schools with high tuition fees. Finland's higher education system on the other hand differs a lot from others, since the schools are public, no tuition fees are charged and funding comes from the state and municipalities, therefore autonomy and competition is limited. (Molesworth et. al. 2011, 1-5; 19.) However, the amount of funding in Finnish Universities of Applied Science depends on the amount of enrolled students and completed degrees (Ministry of education and Culture [referred 6.4.2011]). Therefore competition between existing universities

and various types of negative effects of commercialization may occur. For example Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences have been accused of using marketing with misleading conceptions to attract more applicants. (SAMOK 2011, [referred 4.4.2011])

2.1.2 Higher education as a service

Marketing such a highly intangible product like education is a complicated task, and researchers suggest that higher education is better viewed as a service, rather than a product. Mazzarol (1998, 2-3) refers to Zeithaml et al. (1985), who determines the primary characteristics of a service, which can also be found when observing higher education as a service:

1. Intangibility
2. Inseparability of production and consumption
3. Heterogeneity
4. Perishability

Using various sources Mazzarol (1998, 3) lists the few most problematic effects of intangibility; services cannot be stored, which for institutes of education may cause issues regarding capacity - like overcrowding or lack of capacity. Concerning services - patents are harder to procure as well as pricing is a more difficult task to do. Also due to intangibility, displaying and communicating services in an understandable and detailed way to a customer or prospect is not as simple as doing the same with a product.

A service is created and consumed at the same time, and especially this type of service (education) requires also the presence of a customer to be properly fulfilled – if a student doesn't attend a lesson, he will not receive the service. How well a student receives the benefits of the service is also somewhat dependable on the factor *how many consumers* are simultaneously involved in the production process of the service. (Mazzarol 1998, 3.)

Services like education are highly heterogeneous, meaning the service production- and consuming process cannot be completely standardized neither controlled – therefore quality deviation and additional challenges from non-standardization may occur. Perishability means for education that once a service has been delivered and consumed - it doesn't exist anymore and these services cannot be stored anywhere beforehand. This may cause e.g. over or under supply. (Mazzarol 1998, 3.)

On a more general level, but still applicable to the world of higher education; Grönroos (2009, 79) states that the most important feature of services is their process-like nature.

Services are processes consisting of actions, where multiple types of resources are used – humans and other physical resources, knowledge, systems and infrastructures – often in direct interaction with the customer, so that a solution for the customer's problem is to be found (Grönroos 2009, 79).

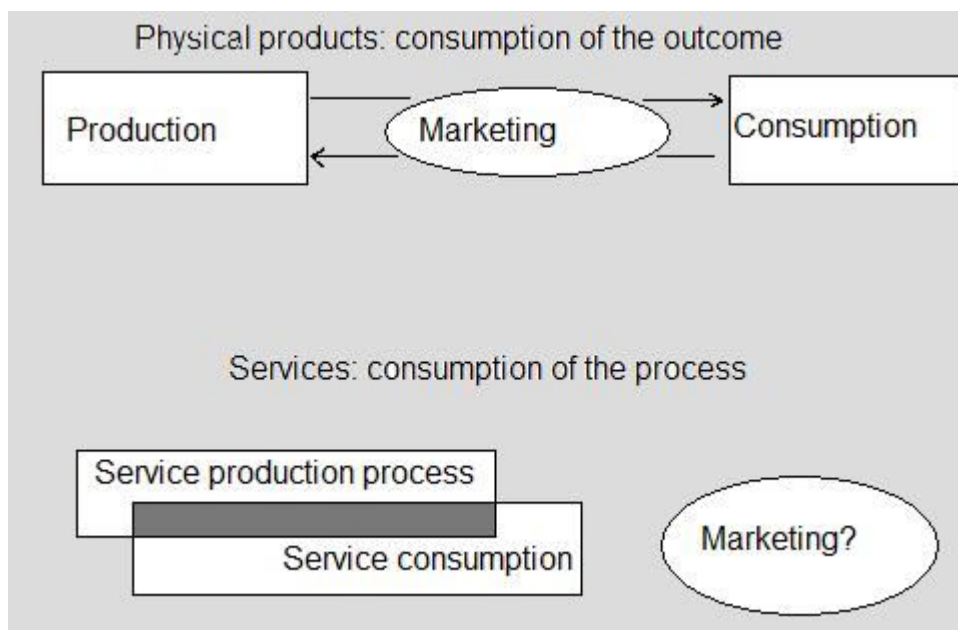


Figure1. Role of marketing (Adapted from Grönroos 2009, 87).

What Grönroos (2009, 87) means with the figure above, is that marketing traditionally serves as a "bridge" in the gap between a product's production and consumption processes, which are separated from each other by time and location.

But when it comes to marketing services, like education, marketing itself does not fit anywhere in between since the two processes are simultaneous.

It is essential to make the service's production- and consumption processes match each other so well, that the consumers and users experience the good quality and value of the service and are willing to continue their relationship with the service provider (Grönroos 2009, 87-88).

2.1.3 Values of different sources of information

A rapid rise of social media phenomenon has changed the ways how higher education is marketed today, but it hasn't completely replaced the conventional ways. A study conducted in 2005 in the United States revealed that physical items, like mail from a school, had as much influence on prospects' choice of university as did Facebook/Youtube/MySpace and other social media sites. But the study also noted the fact that the use of these sites (also Twitter) has grown significantly since 2006, and universities have become much more active on marketing through social media after that. (Johnston 2010, 5.) In today's world of intangible information, one might still assume that perhaps physical items, like leaflets and brochures from a certain school, might even make an impression to a prospect – since one doesn't see them so much anymore, and at least it is something tangible – something real.

Regardless of the rise of social media, according to the same survey above it was found out that the most influential factors in choosing a university were parents, other family and friends. Also a *visit to the university* itself was rated highly influential along the influence of family members and friends, but not as high as the influence of "own mother". (Johnston 2010, 4.)

Word of mouth is a strong influential factor in marketing, but it is not easily controlled by the marketer. Social media has truly brought up the meaning of "influential peers" in internet marketing, and marketing communication isn't anymore just receiver-to-sender messaging - but more of a two-way interaction model (Johnston 2010, 1). If the current path continues, social media will most likely gain more im-

portance in the future of higher education marketing, and universities need to find ways how to operate effectively in this environment.

When consumers hear about a product, they find this information from their peers more credible than the same information coming from the company. Still not all peers can influence in the same way; one in ten Americans were considered as highly influential consumers compared to the other nine when they were studied as a group of consumers. (Johnston 2010, 2.)

Word-of-mouth is especially powerful in cases where the consumer is relatively unfamiliar with the product category. Interpersonal transmission can be quite rapid and effective, but one must be aware that a negative word-of-mouth is weighted more heavily by consumers than positive comments. (Solomon, Bamossy & Askegaard 1999, 282.)

2.1.4 Success factors in international education marketing

Mazzarol (1998, 1) explored and identified in his study the key success factors in international education marketing. By studying the world's leading educational institutions he came to the conclusion of there being four dominant success factors out of the 17 identified ones, which are:

1. Image
2. Resources
3. Coalition
4. Forward integration

Image and reputation (past images) refers to as how desirable the institution is seen by a prospective student. More about image and attractivity on chapter 2.2. Resources include factors such as physical size, alumni influence, academic staff, and range of offered programs and courses. Coalition is about possessing strategic alliances abroad (partnership universities etc.), and forward integration refers to "offshore teaching programs". (Mazzarol 1998, 10.)

However, Mazzarol (1998, 3) notes there being no ready fits-for-all –model for marketing a higher education institution internationally, since the subject is relatively little studied, and on the other hand cultural and regional differences may affect to how any kind of marketing is perceived in each different area. Other notable matter is that “offshore teaching programs” aren’t a practiced custom among Finnish universities of applied sciences, although teacher/professor exchanges do occur at least between those universities with partnerships abroad.

2.2 Attractivity of a university

One way to measure attractivity of a university, is to examine the number of primary applicants in comparison to the overall number of the institutions’ current students. By primary applicants is meant those students who have selected a university as his/her first choice (applies mainly with the system used in Finland). But how to describe the attractivity factors of a university?

When observing earlier studies, the order of attractivity factors of a university have slightly changed over time, but still the list of the factors remain rather similar. Studies concerning the universities and colleges in the United States (Domino et. al. 2006, 2), lists the following as positive influencers on a choice of a certain educational institution:

- 1) National academic reputation, 2) quality of educational majors, 3) prestige of the university

Others than the first factor aren’t really applicable when considering universities of applied sciences in Finland, unless “majors” are seen as “study programs or available subjects”. “Prestige” most likely doesn’t exist yet in its exact meaning among the young universities of applied sciences, since the whole system is relatively new, but perhaps it can be translated as “having a good image” in the case of UAS’. However, the list continues with more fitting attributes, such as:

...quality of facilities, variety of majors (subjects/programs), quality of faculty, size and location of the school, also distance to home, extra-curricular activities and quality of social life, and of course costs (Domino et. al. 2006, 2).

A good reputation or image may be one of the strongest influencers already alone, but theoretically it has rather interesting characteristics. A good reputation of a company might be due to high demand and high sales, but when considering a university; high demand is obviously good, but it seems to be that the good reputation comes from minimal sales. The fewer students the institution accepts, the more prestigious it is considered. (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2006, 7.)

As mentioned above, attractiveness of an educational institution is also somewhat dependable on the image of the city where it is located. Naturally larger cities attract more applicants only by power of numbers, but also the attractiveness of the host city must play a role when a prospective student considers moving into this new location. A national newspaper published the amounts of money spent yearly on marketing by Finnish universities of applied sciences, and it was stated that one institution in a bigger city spent 20 000 Euros, whereas another from a smaller city spent 250 000 – just to reach equivalent results measured in amount of applicants. (Helsingin Sanomat 2011 [referred 2.5.2011].)

Theoretically on a more international context, according to Srikatanyoo & Gnoth (2002, 1), country image has either a halo effect or a summary effect on a certain product which is viewed by a foreign person. They explain the meaning of country image on a product as following:

When consumers are unfamiliar with a country's products, country image performs as a halo construct, in which country image affects consumer's beliefs about product attributes, and these beliefs affect consumer's attitudes towards a brand. On the other hand, when consumers have more experience or have become more familiar with a country's products, country image operates as a summary construct, whereby consumers' beliefs about product attributes influence country image. Meanwhile, country image directly affects the brand attitude. (Srikatanyoo & Gnoth 2002, 1.)

The role of country image seems to be greater when the evaluation is directed at products of high involvement; such as an expensive car or education, in comparison to a t-shirt (low involvement) wherein the country image doesn't necessarily influence as much. On the other hand, when evaluating hedonic products like wine or cigars, country of origin might be the most important factor. But as noted in earlier chapters, education is indeed a service rather than a product, and a service's

intangible nature makes it hard to be evaluated beforehand. (Srikatanyoo & Gnoth 2002, 1) Thereby:

When intrinsic cues of a product (eg. taste, design, performance) are unknown or not available, consumers more frequently evaluate products by using extrinsic cues (eg. country of origin, brand name) (Srikatanyoo & Gnoth 2002, 1).

Education is a high involvement product accompanied with the intangibility factor, therefore country image may have a significant effect on the consumer's perception of quality concerning the country's educational institutions.

2.3 Going abroad – influential factors on choosing a foreign university

The idea of studying abroad involves an extra amount of emotive incitement that provokes the motivation for some students to take on the additional challenge of going abroad for studies. Going abroad involves risks and a great level of uncertainty of the becoming, therefore a person who is willing to face it is most likely seeking personal intellectual growth by consciously exposing himself to new and unknown situations. A student might see studying abroad as a challenge of succeeding in a different environment – a fear of failure is still present but it is usually overcome by the more probable success. Succeeding in a task such as this may also seem like an attractive opportunity to gain experience for those students who are willing to work in an international work environment in the future. (Taajamo 2005, 38.)

According to a theory by Mazzarol & Soutar (2002, 1-5), a person's choice of studying abroad is affected by push and pull –forces. The economical and social “pushing forces” are present at the person's homeland and they eventually lead to the decision of going abroad. Pulling forces are associated with the host country. The actual process of selecting the final host university is described to consist of three different stages: first of all the student needs to decide to study abroad and this may be influenced by various push factors. The second stage is about choosing the target nation, which is highly influenced by the pull-factors that make one country seem more attractive than others. On the third stage the student must se-

lect the institution, once again pull factors affect the decision, but they originate from the institutions themselves (see chapter 2.2. and 2.1.3. for *attractivity of a university*). (Mazzarol & Soutar 2002, 2; Taajamo 2005, 38.)

The same study pointed out 6 strongest influential factors concerning the choice of the host country: 1) How much is known about the host country and how easily this information can be acquired in the home country? 2) Recommendations of parents, friends and relatives. 3) Costs of living, travelling and studying (study fees particularly). 4) Environmental/cultural differences in the host country; attitudes, local lifestyle, climate, language etc. 5) Distance between the host and home country. 6) Earlier social relationships to the host country; whether relatives or friends live or have lived there before. (Taajamo 2005, 38-39.)

2.3.1 Country specific factors: Image of Finland to foreign students

As stated before in chapter 2.2 the image of the host country plays an important role in shaping the perception what a student has about a certain product or service, such as university in this case. In a study called “Foreign students in Finland” by Taajamo (2005) is stated that foreign students see the level of education in Nordic countries being generally high. Nordic countries are also known for their special nature and Finland is considered exotic in Europe. Finland is generally known as a provider of free education, which according to the study was appreciated especially by students from less rich countries. Technological knowhow and education’s availability in English were also mentioned. It was also noted that Finland might not always be the first choice:

Usually a student has an inner thrive to get to study somewhere abroad, and in most cases it means an English speaking country (Taajamo 2005, 34-35).

Most of the degree students who then studied in Finland had had a contact into Finland before ending up there as a degree student. It was either a vacation visit beforehand, an exchange period, or a relative, friend or spouse living already in the country, which affected to the decision. Those students who might have pre-

ferred an English speaking target country, but eventually ended up moving into Finland, could have done it due to financial reasons. (Taajamo 2005, 34-35.)

A broad quantitative study was conducted by Kinnunen (2003) concerning the integration of foreign students into Finland. The same study clarified reasons why foreign people have chosen to move into Finland; the most common reasons were 1) Obtaining a degree, 2) Better opportunities for future career development, 3) Experiencing a foreign country and 4) Perceived image of Finland's high quality education. (Kinnunen 2003, 27.)

Another survey was made for the representatives of Finnish higher education institutions to determine the *strengths and weaknesses of Finnish HE institutions from the viewpoint of recruiting foreign degree students*. As strengths of Universities of Applied Sciences the respondents kept the following: No tuition fee, functioning student services, internationally remarkable knowhow, good image and students' good employment after studies. (Aalto 2003, 23.) These results go pretty well hand in hand with the other studies UAS Seinäjoki made a few years later with actual degree students (see chapter 2.3.2).

2.3.2 Earlier studies: Reasons for choosing a Finnish university

Seinäjoki UAS conducted two quantitative surveys between years 2009 and 2010, which examined exactly the same questions with similar target groups as this study does, but only in a form of a closed internet survey. These studies indicate that in 2010 when 23 students were asked *which factors mostly influenced your decision on choosing Finland as your target country* - majority of respondents emphasized the answer "safe country", followed by "high quality education", "flexibility of studies" and "interesting country". Surprisingly "friends' and family recommendations" was rated one of the lowest influential factors. 2009 results were rather similar, but at least one or more respondents mentioned "No tuition fee" in the open section (other reason). (Borisov & Isomaa 2010, 5.) Seems like the image of Finland as a safe country with high quality education attracted the respondents the most. Noteworthy is though, that nearly all of the respondents were from so called developing countries.

The study also examined the reasons why the same respondents chose exactly Seinäjoki University of Applied Sciences. Results indicated that the image of “high quality education” and Seinäjoki being in a “good location” were the most significant influencers, and after that came “Seinäjoki UAS was a random choice”. (Borisov & Isomaa 2010, 7.)

A recent study conducted by Talouselämä-magazine listed the Finnish universities of applied science and evaluated them with 10 quality indicators. It came out that UAS Seinäjoki was one of the three institutions with the worst attractiveness problem; too few applicants marked Seinäjoki as their primary choice when applying into universities. Therefore to fulfill the open spots for students, the school needs to accept those who might lack in motivation to study exactly there, which in case may cause discontinued degrees or low grades. (Talouselämä 2011, 26.)

3 RESEARCH METHOD

Focus group interview was chosen as the method of research since its characteristics provide the best possibilities to reach the aims of this particular study. This chapter covers the theory behind qualitative research and the method of focus group interview. Further on it explains the practical implementation of the whole study, and the last part focuses on the methods of analysis and how the results were interpreted.

3.1 Qualitative research

Qualitative research is a group of methods and trends of researching social relations, humans and their lives. Common feature within all the methods is the examination of *life worlds* (*philosophy*: the world as it is lived / experienced). Qualitative research aims to form an understanding of a given phenomenon by studying meanings and their relations within the phenomenon itself. (Flick 2002, 2; KvalimöTV 2006, 1.2. [referred 22.5.2011].) The process of building an overview of a phenomenon goes from collecting individual observations to forming a generalization based on the findings (Hirsijärvi & Hurme 2001, 25).

Researchers speaking in favor of quantitative methods have criticized qualitative methods for the lack of precision, since the methods aren't purely based on numbers like in quantitative studies, and because the outcomes may be affected by the researcher himself (e.g. interviewer), but an argument in favor of qualitative methods says:

Precision may exist even without numbers. More important is whether the information is accurate (truthful) or not. (Hirsijärvi & Hurme 2001, 24.)

Today is not uncommon that quantitative and qualitative methods are used together to support each other. Essential is to choose the method correctly according to the research problem. For example in practice, using both methods could work when studying socially excluded people:

Qualitative methods bring out their viewpoint of the matter (gives voice), whereas quantitative methods reveal the extent and degree of the ongoing injustice which they are facing. (Hirsijärvi & Hurme 2001, 27.)

Focus group interview, a method of qualitative research used in this particular study, is explained below accompanied with the reasons why it was selected as the most suitable form of research.

3.2 Focus group interview

Focus group interview is one of the methods of qualitative research, often used when studying a rather fresh topic (not well researched), when seeking new information, opinions and feelings about a certain issue, or when gathering and comparing opinions of different groups of people. In practice, focus group interviewing can be a useful tool in for example supporting quantitative studies, measuring and determining customer satisfaction, or developing organizational efficiency. (Krueger & Casey 2009, 8-11.)

Focus group interview is a semi-structured interview situation, where certain discussion themes are predetermined and organized. The group usually consists of 4-12 people, and the interviewer's task is more to promote discussion about the themes than just to interview. (Flick, U. 2002, 120.) Morgan (1997, 2) summarizes the essence of focus groups as following:

The hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group.

Robert Merton, who studied morale and social sciences during and after the World War II, noted that:

People revealed sensitive information when they felt they were in a safe, comfortable place with people like themselves. (Krueger & Casey 2009, 3.)

The certain discussion themes are decided beforehand to help the interviewer and interviewees proceed in a logical order, but the interviewer is always allowed to ask further specifying questions during the interview situation if a certain topic seems to require it.

Focus group interviewing does include a few negative factors as well, which should be taken into account;

Participants may make up answers when they are asked about topics where they have limited or no experience. Answering “I don’t know” can be embarrassing, and instead of admitting lack of knowledge the individual invents an answer that would likely be the response if she had actually encountered the experience. (Krueger & Casey 2009, 14.)

Also dominant individuals may sometimes influence the results, but it is the interviewer’s (or moderator’s) task to minimize this effect (Krueger & Casey 2009, 15).

However, focus group interview was selected as the most suitable method of research in this study, since the aim is to:

- find new information & cover the range of unstudied reasons behind certain choices
- get an overview of the opinions of “customers”
- discover differences or similarities between categorized groups of people
- see whether people can be categorized into groups by their opinions
- uncover factors of influence on decisions

3.3 Implementation of the research

The interviewees were randomly selected among the current foreign degree students of Seinäjoki UAS Business School. Nearly all of the degree students (30) were sent an invitation by e-mail, but it turned out that most of the degree students weren’t either in the country at the moment, or otherwise not available at the time.

Those available were personally met and informed about the becoming interview. Getting people to take part in interviews is not an easy task, and therefore motivating people to take part in an interview is important for two reasons: 1) some people have a tendency to avoid new situations, but when the situation is explained to them with details – they might even get excited about it. 2) Personal recommendation highlights the importance of each interviewee and might help in getting the wanted persons to take part. (Hirsijärvi & Hurme 2001, 85.)

Five interview groups were formed based on nationality of the interviewees for the possibility of comparing the results between different regions. Also, as mentioned in the previous chapter about “people revealing sensitive information more easily when being in a safe place with people like themselves”, nationality plays an important role concerning this matter. (Krueger & Casey 2009, 3.) The group forming however didn’t work out as well as planned, since a few students still cancelled their appointments. Eventually the interview groups were as following:

Table 1. Number of interviewees & country of origin

Country of origin	Number of participants
China	1 (male student)
Vietnam	2 (1 female, 1 male student)
Africa	4 (1 female, 3 male students)
Nepal	4 (male students)
Czech & Latvia (Mixed group)	2 (1 male, 1 female)

As seen above, only two of the groups may actually be called “groups” and a valid country comparison, or even nationwide generalization of opinions, can’t be made.

The interview was based on a few preselected themes, which were formed through the thesis objectives. When building the interview structure, theoretically appropriate framework was followed to ensure the best possible results.

The formed main themes (1-3) and additional themes (4-5) were as following:

- 1) Reasons for moving into Finland
 - 2) Reasons for selecting UAS Seinäjoki
 - 3) Sources of information concerning
 - a. Finland
 - b. UAS Seinäjoki
 - 4) Suggested ways of marketing the institution in the respondents' own local region
 - a. What kind of information should be delivered
 - b. How the information should be delivered
 - 5) Staying in Finland after studies
-

The actual interviews were conducted in a private meeting room of the UAS Seinäjoki facilities. This location was a natural selection, since it was familiar to all of the participants beforehand. The interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder. After being seated, each group was offered cookies and water just for the sake of politeness. Slight nervousness was noticeable within all participants while being seated, but soon after the interview got started with an easy-to-answer -introductory question - the atmosphere turned much more relaxed and a feel of excitement, in addition to laughing, was present in every interview. Cookies and water were eventually enjoyed with a short chat after each interview, which may have been a sign of the interviewees feeling good about being heard.

Although the interviews went seemingly well, the results would have been better if an experienced interviewer would have been used. A few moments occurred, where the interviewer (author himself) should have asked for a more detailed answer, but didn't do this, because the amount of information seemed overwhelming, even though it didn't include the wanted content. At times the conversation went off its intended path, and too much irrelevant material was built up by this – this was mainly a problem with the groups of four persons. The problem with the “groups” of one and two persons had rather little information to offer, since no actual conversation occurred between the interviewees. The interview structure was tested with two preliminary interview situations, and then after enhanced based on the observations and suggestions.

3.4 Methods of analysis

To interpret the results, the recorded audio was entirely transcribed into a text file. According to Flick (2002, 171), transcription is an essential step towards interpretation. It is required to organize the collected data and to examine the connections within it – i.e. to analyze the data. Transcription only included what was being said, but not for example emotions or extra pauses during one's speech.

It seems more reasonable to transcribe only as much and only as exactly as is required by the research question (Strauss, 1987). An over exact transcription of data absorbs time and energy which could be invested more reasonably in their interpretation. (Flick 2002, 171-172.)

Inductive content analysis was used as a method of analysis in this particular work. The essence of material oriented content analysis is to find and summarize all the relevant information concerning the objectives of the study, and to find connections within the material in favor of reaching useful, and perhaps new, information that connects the results of the work into a greater context or may even be used in comparison to other related studies. Inductive (reasoning) refers to the way how material orientated analysis is done, where a theory or generalization is being built from the results themselves, starting from individual observations leading towards more generalized statements; e.g. “those two cats are black → all cats

are black.” (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002, 95-99, 105; KvaliMOTV 2006 [referred 17.5.2011].)

In practice, various methods of analysis were used to form an understanding of the studied phenomenon. At first the transcribed text was *coded* – all relevant answers (sentences) concerning the studied questions were marked with pens of different colors. Each color indicated a country and a gender of the respondent in order to make regional comparison and gender identification possible at a later stage. These full sentences were *summarized* and written with computer on a single text file, where they were being *thematized* afterwards. During summarizing the irrelevant or repeating phrases are removed (Flick 2002, 191) and by *thematizing* (in this case) is meant that by the represented theme of each answer, the answers were placed under the correct one of the five themed questions, regardless of the respondents’ nation or gender. Not all of the answers instantly fitted under the original question, so the content of the sentences had to be evaluated with precision.

After this, each question with its answers were separated into a text file of its own. The answers were then reduced into a shortest possible form, so that the actual meaning still remained the same. The sentences with the same exact meaning were combined, forming sub-categories. The sentences inside the sub-categories were unified and became known as “reduced expressions” – the building blocks of the analysis. Similar type of expressions were still put together by their nature, and these new groups of expressions formed three upper categories for the themes number 1 & 2, which were then named. Forming categories by finding similarities and differences between expressions may help the researcher to understand the studied phenomenon or even to find a link between the empirical and theoretical material (Hirsijärvi & Hurme 2001, 150). The data concerning themes number 3, 4 & 5 were only analyzed by comparing regional differences due to the lack of collected data, and no additional categories were formed. During this process, the original full transcribed texts of each group were viewed again to get a clear understanding of the opinions of each group and respondent.

The formed categories of the themes 1 & 2 resemble the general reasons of the respondents for choosing Finland and UAS Seinäjoki as the place of study, and

they are visually shown in Table 2 & Table 3. Tables 4 – 5 indicate the regional differences concerning the *suggested ways of marketing in homeland*, and *opinions about staying in Finland*. Appendices 1 & 2 clarify how the different categories were formed from the simplified (reduced) expressions.

4 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Preliminary information of the interviewees

The 13 interviewees were between 19 – 30 years old. Nearly half of them had studied in another university before, but only the oldest (26 & 30) actually had another degree from their home country. Most of the interviewed students knew each other at the moment, but none of them had met each other before coming into this particular school. The represented countries of origin were China, Czech, Ghana, Latvia, Nepal, Nigeria and Vietnam (see Table 2).

One male interviewee from Czech Republic cannot be considered as a “normal foreign degree student” concerning each of the themes, since his career as a professional athlete requires him to study at the same time. His choices regarding the school and country were almost completely sports-related.

4.2 Motives for choosing Finland

The participants were asked to think about the time when they made their decision about moving into Finland – what were the reasons behind this choice and what influenced their decision?

When examining the overall outcome of the answers, a reason for moving into Finland was mentioned 18 times, and when put into simplified form there were only 11 different reasons (see Table 2). These reasons were categorized into three main groups by the nature of their content, they were: Recommendations, socio-economical reasons, and perceived opportunities. Categorizing allows a light comparison between the respondents and their represented countries. The table 2 and figure 2 below gives an idea how the different answers were divided, following a more detailed analyze and explanation of the results:

Table 2. Reasons for choosing Finland

REASONS FOR CHOOSING FINLAND		
Recommendations	Socio-economical reasons	Perceived opportunities
China parents	Vietnam free education	Africa international degree
relatives advised	free education	strengthening a degree
friend recommendation	free education	high level of education
friend recommendation	free education	good economy
consultancy	free education	
teacher	Latvia free education	
	homecountry not pleasing	
	homecountry not pleasing	

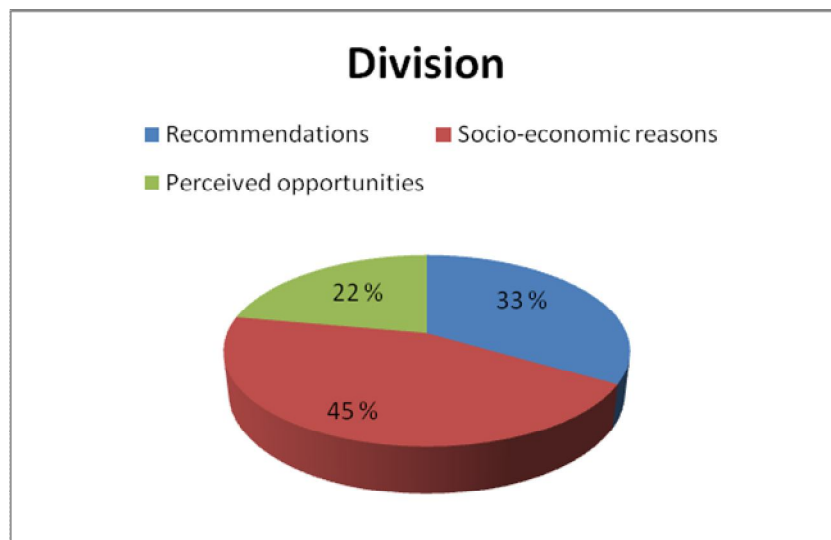


Figure 2. Choosing Finland: division of main categories

Socio-economical reasons clearly dominate the field of reasons (see figure 2 above), and not surprisingly “free education” was mentioned by at least one member of each group, although not by the one Chinese person who based his decision on his parents’ advice and on the image what he had of Finland.

“I knew that Finland is a very nice country with good and beautiful environment. And after my school I discussed with my parents and they just told me to go to the Nordic countries, and so I said okay, I go there, I choose Finland.” (Male, China)

Members of other groups seemed to have somewhat noticeable characteristics in their answers when compared to other groups. The two Vietnamese students were familiar with the education system of Finland, and since the opportunity for free education was available – they simply decided to go for it.

“I wasn’t satisfied with my first degree, so I decided to cancel it. And because I can’t afford another country, I decided to go to Finland.” (Female, Vietnam)

Nepalese students emphasized heavily the image of Finland’s free education, but also brought up a distinctive factor about not being satisfied with the circumstances in one’s homeland. In addition, Finland’s economy was seen in a good light, and a friend’s/teacher’s/consultancies’ recommendations had a big influence on all of the respondents’ decision to move out to Finland.

“My university teacher always used to say that “if you want to go to earn to the economic [unclear], you just need to go there (Finland).” (Male, Nepal)

“I didn’t like my country, politics are very bad there, doing studies is hard, I wasn’t getting on the right track, so I decided to go abroad. I went to consultancy, and they said the Nordic countries have free education there, but Norway and Sweden were closed – so the last option for me was Finland, so I was like okay, I need it. So I did it.”

“My neighbor in Nepal, he’s now a professor in Kemi, and he has a brother studying in Arkadia, Helsinki. They said it’s good if you try here. First I tried to the US, but they didn’t give me the visa” (Male, Nepal)

“I was really tired of my country and I was just waiting to get out of my place.” (Male, Nepal)

The three African male respondents, who all already had another degree or had studied in a university before, referred to the level of education in Finland and two of them told they wanted to upgrade their international competence by completing another degree in the field of international business. Free education was also mentioned as a reason to choose Finland, but it seems like the emphasis was more on the need of personal and professional development for securing the future living. The female respondent from Ghana ended up into Finland through a

relative's recommendation, even though she already had an admission to a university in her homeland. That is not known why Finland was suggested by a relative and what was said during the recommendation. Therefore any kind of motive, including "free education", could have been in the background, but this cannot be stated, since the interviewer did not understand to ask for clarification on this matter.

"After my high school I got an admission to a university in Ghana, but some of my relatives advised me to come here, so then I moved here. That's the only reason."
(Female, Ghana)

"After my first degree, I thought that I need an international degree, and that's why I chose Finland, because I knew the education is free." (Male, Nigeria)

"I realized I had to make my first degree more stronger, and so I chose to come to Finland to study international business." (Male, Nigeria)

The Latvian female student visited an educational exhibition in her hometown and found out about Finland's free education system, which got her to apply to Finland instead of going to UK, which was her original plan and would have required more money than she expected. The pro-athlete from Czech came to Finland because of his past experiences here as an exchange student made him to apply again for a full degree. Noteworthy is though, that behind applying to Finland, and especially Seinäjoki, was the willingness to play for an exact team. His motives are not shown in the table 2.

4.3 Motives for choosing UAS Seinäjoki

When asked about the motives for choosing exactly UAS Seinäjoki over all the other possibilities, the results were rather unambiguous (see figure 3). For most of the respondents Seinäjoki was just a random choice and nearly nothing was known in advance about the city or the school itself (see table 3). To clarify the random choice: foreign students select four possible universities in which they apply through one entrance exam – and the results will tell which one they get into. Fortunately there was at least one distinct factor that attracted couple of respon-

dents towards Seinäjoki, and this was the availability of the International Business –degree program.

Table 3. Reasons for choosing UAS Seinäjoki

Recommendations	Random choice	Certain degree
	not my first choice	
relatives	not my first choice	
cousin	not my first choice	
	not my first choice	
	not my first choice	
	Random choice	
	Random choice	international business
	Random choice	
	Random choice	(International business)

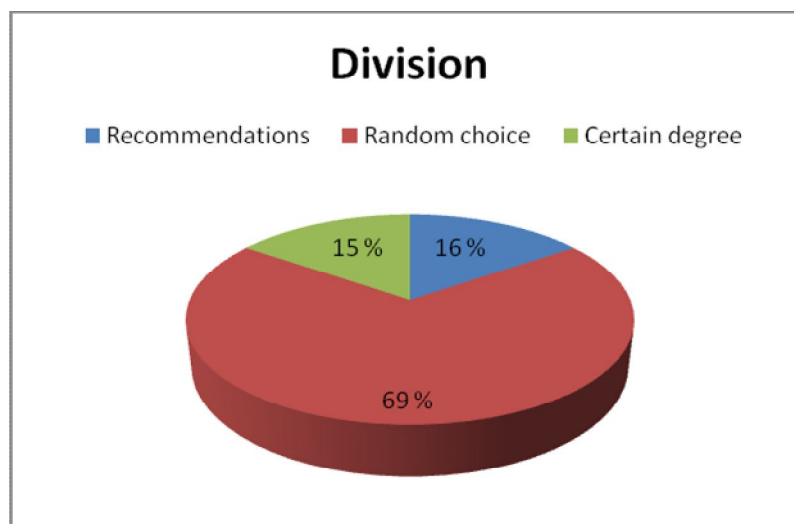


Figure 3. UAS Seinäjoki: division of main categories

The Vietnamese students had already contacts to this region, and therefore ended up studying here by a relative's recommendation.

“One of my relatives is also living in Vaasa and they recommended this place for me. There was also the possibility to study in Vaasa, but I didn’t get there, so this was my second choice.” (Male, Vietnam)

“I also had a cousin studying here a year earlier than me, and she recommended me this place. And this was my first option.” (Female, Vietnam)

The term “Not my first choice” was often used, and it is categorized under “Random choice” since apparently the school didn’t have any kind of special image or anything else that would distinct it from others through the eyes of the respondents. No one mentioned anything remarkable, other than the IB-program, which had an indirect influence on a few respondents.

“I applied to multiple universities and Seinäjoki was the first one who replied. Also I figured it out that this is the study, international business, where I fit in. But Seinäjoki was actually a random choice from all the business schools, so it didn’t even matter which schools I applied.” (Female, Latvia)

“But it’s the subjects that make us come here, like international business. They (teachers, consultancies) recommend us to go there (Finland) and study international business, because it has a great demand in future and we could be employed in multinational companies” (Male, Nepal)

Even though the athlete from Czech chose Seinäjoki in favor of his career, he did mention the field of study having a slight influence.

“My manager first recommended me to go to Ilmajoki, but I chose Seinäjoki, because it’s easier to go to practice here, everything is near, and there was this international business which I would like to study, so I decided to go there (Seinäjoki). (Male athlete, Czech)

4.4 Sources of information regarding UAS Seinäjoki and Finland

As stated in the previous chapter, nearly nothing was known about Seinäjoki or the university before applying to the school, therefore sources of information concerning UAS Seinäjoki weren’t very well covered. Those who responded they knew “a little” about Seinäjoki had a contact person already living in the region or nearby, and others searched information from internet by themselves. What this “little” is, is unknown, but it seems like it didn’t contain anything special, since no one wasn’t willing to specify his/her answer. Few students explained that they received the list of business schools from internet, and just picked Seinäjoki from there, others seemed to agree to these comments by using body language (nodding). The list

was introduced either by a teacher (Chinese), consultancy (Nepalese), or sports agent (Czech).

The Latvian student thought she knew something about the school and the region, but apparently not, since:

There was an exhibition of universities, and there was someone from SAMK – I guess I just mixed it up (with SeAMK). (Female, Latvia)

And then she eventually applied to SeAMK, perhaps half-accidentally. Two Nepalese students commented their experiences concerning Seinäjoki and their expectations about it:

“But like people don’t know anything about Seinäjoki, everybody thinks about it as a big city and getting some work and money, but...after they come here... (Fellow student continues) Yeah that’s another problem that the school has to face – that after first year of studies the students try to switch into bigger cities.” (Students, Nepal)

A tone of disappointment was obvious in the statements above.

Sources of information concerning Finland were a bit more diverse. Vietnamese, African and Nepalese students mentioned “friends and internet” as initial sources of information. Also for Nepalese; teachers and consultancies were important sources. Vietnamese had more information about Finland also through traditional media, like TV and newspapers, but the Latvian female student said she learned about Finland more at the university exhibition mentioned above. The Chinese student knew Finland originally through the fame of Kimi Räikkönen, he also mentioned the beauty of Finnish nature, snow and landscapes, which he got familiar with via internet. His teacher, an agency, parents and mostly internet provided him all the necessary information about Finland and its schools.

Interestingly though, the Finnish-Swedish university of applied science in Helsinki, Arcada, was mentioned multiple times during the interviews. Apparently three Nepalese students and the one Chinese chose Arcada as their first one.

“My teacher gave me the suggestion that I should choose Arcada, and then the second one was Lahti, and then Seinäjoki. And Lahti, because I went through this kind of agency and they suggested me to go there, because our city and Lahti has this friendship.” (Male, China)

“Of course everybody wants to go to Helsinki, because it’s big city and easier to get some work and so on.” (Male, Nepal)

“Yeah, I had chosen Arcada first and then I had Seinäjoki” (Male, Nepal)

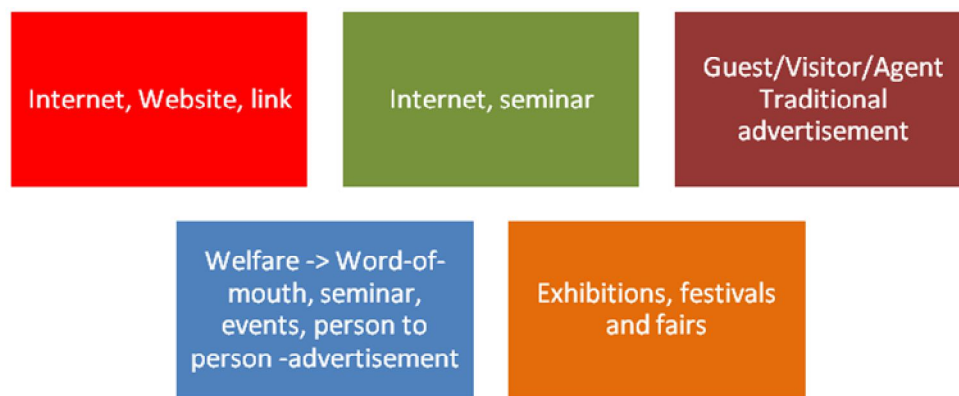
One African student mentioned choosing TAMK (UAS Tampere) as his first choice before Seinäjoki. The first choices of rest of the respondents are unknown.

4.5 Suggested ways of marketing in homeland

In the end the students were still asked about their opinions on *what kind of marketing they would consider effective in their own region*, and *whether they are going to stay in Finland after their studies*. These questions generated not only useful answers, but also strong emotions and opinions.

When suggesting the most effective ways to market a university in the respondents’ own region, the answers were somewhat similar to the answers how the respondents themselves heard about Finland’s educational opportunities. Answers were instantly supported with good arguments by each group, and therefore considered accurate. Below (Table 4) is listed what kind of ways of marketing the respondents from each region proposed.

Table 4. Suggested ways of marketing



Legend: China, Vietnam, Africa, Nepal, Latvia (& Czech)

"I think if the school wants to do marketing, the first thing is that they must let people know more about Finland. It's better to do with the internet, because I think now the teenagers in China, they spend most of their time like on the internet. And I think if somebody wants to study or go abroad – they will search the information from the internet. I think the school should put a link on a website about Finland, so if they search a page like "Finland" and they see the link to our school – I think they will be interested." (Male, China)

The Chinese student also proposed a web portal where other Chinese students could follow the exchange students currently living in Finland. He mentioned that his friends were asking him about the practical aspects of living in Finland, such as "the distance to the supermarket and school" and "how good is the school?" and "is it safe there?" and so on. A web portal could possibly encourage others to consider studying in Finland as well.

Vietnamese kept the internet and seminars as the best options to promote the school.

"Right now some organization is holding a seminar in Finland, I think they could do similar in my country and my city. It would be better for the potential students, who want to study and for them to know more." (Male, Vietnam)

Africans noted internet not being a very good option there. Marketing through agents and guest lecturers or visitors were considered more effective. Also traditional advertising was seen as an option.

“The agents can come to the schools and meet people and they can put it through, to process the admission (abroad), and the best of case end with a residential admission.” (Male, Africa)

The Nepalese emphasized also events and seminars to make Finland and the school's more known. They brought up building knowledge and trust between the nations through welfare work, from which Finland is apparently somewhat known of in Nepal already. Person to person –marketing was kept important, as well as word-of-mouth was thought to be a very strong influencer.

The fifth interview group with the Czech and Latvian students continued with the exhibition theme.

“In spring time we have a lot of big school exhibitions (100 – 500 schools) and they are on time to apply to Finland, so it might be good to attend those. Everyone has a choice to pick the right one, and if the information is that the studies are free, and that there are such studies what we have, like almost anything, that might help. Because many people are looking for free education, and about Europe level education that it's valid in every European country.” (Female, Latvia)

The Czech athlete spoke also for the exhibitions, and added a suggestion of advertising in other happenings as well:

“Because I come from everything with floorball, and there are always commercials during the games, and so I think it might work well like this, because a lot of young people are interested in the games, so they might be like from high schools and they don't know what to do. We could do marketing in not only the games, but like in schools and exhibitions, festivals and fairs.”

Advertising in or attending with agents in floorball games abroad wouldn't probably be a bad idea since floorball originates from the Nordic countries and Finland represents the elite of the sport.

4.6 About staying in Finland

Finally the students were asked whether they were going to stay in Finland after their studies. Table 5 explains their responses in a nutshell.

Table 5. Staying in Finland after studies

"I don't know" master's degree?	"Might stay if there's a chance" "Not for the rest of the life"	"Nothing encourages us to stay" "If opportunity to work - would stay"
	"I probably head to other countries" "If opportunity to work - would stay"	"it is a big question mark right now"

Legend: China, Vietnam, Africa, Nepal, Latvia (& Czech)

The Chinese, Vietnamese, Latvian and the Czech student had quite similar answers. They were all very unsure about the future, and kept *staying in Finland* as a rather unlikely option, but in case of a good opportunity for work or school – might consider staying. The Czech athlete noted though, that his future choices will depend on the playing.

"I don't know exactly, but I have talked with my friends and also my classmates and we are planning to apply for the master degree. But we haven't decided about the school yet." (Male, China)

*"If we have a chance to stay, we might stay. We are not sure about the future yet."
"I like Finland, but I don't think I can stay for the rest of my life." (Male & female from Vietnam)*

"I have quite a plan to go back to Latvia and put up a business there, but on the other hand I could just travel around and apply to some companies where I can use my international skills. But I don't make any plans now, because they never come true [laughing]." (Female, Latvia)

All the African and Nepalese students had very similar opinions together, and this question led to a more serious conversation about the country, region, employ-

ment and even racism. One Nigerian student summed up nicely what clearly all others wanted to say:

"I think as for compensation for the education we got, we should give something back. Like work for some years, before ever going back to our country. But I realize that it's not even the Finnish language that matters, I think there are so many things attached to it"

He explains a situation which happened to his friend, who clearly encountered racial discrimination, and continues while others agree:

"We should be able improve the economy of the country, but they don't give me the room for that! Definitely I need to go back to my country, or then I should be cleaning – the only job black people can get here is cleaning. I have a master's degree and I have to either go back or start cleaning – which doesn't make sense. (Male, Nigeria, MSc in Mechanical Engineering)"

"Basically I have to go with him, after graduating I think if I had more opportunities, like companies to work in – then we can stay. But I realized that our friends that have already graduated, they don't have places to work in." (Male, Nigeria)"

"Well, Seinäjoki is a small place and has a lot of industry, but it doesn't really matter if nothing encourages us to stay. It's like if we want to talk to a Finn, we hear like "vittu" or something, so nothing encourages us to stay." (Male, Nigeria)"

A Nepalese student refers to his friend sitting next to him, and says:

"...like he has been here for almost a year, and he doesn't have any possibilities for work. They just say that "the language is the problem", it's just so easy and beautiful way to say no." (Male, Nepal)"

"For now I think it's okay, but in future if I get better opportunities I will go to other countries. If I would get a good work opportunity here, I would stay." (Male, Nepal)"

"Everybody is trying to learn the language, trying to be more social, hoping for better situation and trying to make good links with people too – but after you try the whole time, and if you don't get anything back - it's frustrating!" (Male, Nepal)"

“It’s a nice country to live in, but not for the whole life. I don’t think it’s possible for us, you know. We want to, but the people won’t allow us.” (Male, Nepal)

5 CONCLUSIONS

The primary aim of this study was to examine why the foreign degree students of UAS Seinäjoki (Business School) have chosen Finland and UAS Seinäjoki as their placement for studies, and from where did they get information about this possibility. They were directly asked these questions in themed group interview – situations, additionally they were asked about their opinions concerning the proper ways of higher education marketing in their own region, and whether they would be willing to stay in Finland after graduation.

The results of this work describe the opinions of a very diverse group of people on the above listed themes. They give more insight to the earlier quantitative studies, and a clear division between opinions of each represented nationality is notable at times, but none of the groups can be viewed as pure generalization of the represented nation's people or their opinions.

According to Aalto (2003, 23) *free education* is the obvious attractiveness factor of Finnish universities. This was supported with the results of this study, when the students were asked about reasons of moving into Finland; *free education* was the dominant influential factor, which was followed by recommendations from parents, relatives and friends. As Johnston (2010, 1) stated in an American survey; friends, other family and especially parents were kept as “the most influential sources of information” when choosing a university. Seems like the influence of relatives' recommendations apply also when choosing a target country for studies.

As Srikatanyoo & Gnoth (2002, 3) mentioned, country image has a remarkable effect on a student's choice when selecting a university abroad, since evaluating the quality of the service is very difficult beforehand, especially when dealing with foreign educational institution. A good image of a country may have a positive influence on a student's perception of a country's products and services, which was also seen in this study. Level of education in Finland was generally considered high and completing a degree in Finland was seen as professionally strengthening advantage, additionally the image of the country's *good economical situation* came up as an influential factor as well. Earlier quantitative studies of the same subject and similar target groups resulted in somewhat similar results, where image fac-

tors, such as *safety*, *quality education*, and *interesting country*, were the dominant reasons for choosing Finland alongside *free education (no tuition fee)* (Borisov & Isomaa 2010).

Information about a product coming from peers (friends/relatives/colleagues) is kept more credible than the same information delivered by the company itself (Johnston 2010, 2). When the students were asked why they eventually chose UAS Seinäjoki, only two actual reasons were found for this: A relative's *recommendation* and the possibility to study *international business*, which was seen as an interesting and purposeful subject. Nine out of thirteen reported choosing UAS Seinäjoki randomly from the list of business schools. Reason for this was that nearly nothing was known of this school. Interestingly though, during the conversation about selection of the school, the Swedish-Finnish University of applied sciences in Helsinki, Arcada, was mentioned three times, Lahti once, and UAS Tampere (TAMK) also once, but Seinäjoki (UAS) apparently did not possess any special image which would have attracted the respondents to apply primarily into it.

Since the information known about Seinäjoki (UAS) before applying was very scarce, the results concerning *sources of information* were also rather unambiguous; Vietnamese had the information from their relatives living in Finland, others saw the name of the school for the first time on the list of business schools, which was introduced by either an agent, teacher or consultant. However, African students mentioned applying through internet by themselves, and received help and information from their friends already living in Finland.

Discussions about the theme "suggested ways of marketing" resulted in considerable propositions by each group, and regional differences were obvious. The Africans emphasized personal contact, agents and more traditional ways of marketing (leaflets, newspapers etc.), whereas both Asian groups recommended primarily internet. Promoting the school through the image of Finland and making more practical information available about the country itself might attract more applicants, according to the Chinese. The Nepalese even mentioned welfare work and its possible effect of generating positive word-of-mouth –communication (WOM) within the country's prospective students. WOM –communication is considered

especially effective when a consumer is not very familiar with a certain product (Solomon et. al. 1999, 282).

Apparently Finland was already somewhat known of doing welfare in this region. But more importantly the Nepalese, Vietnamese and the group Czech / Latvia recommended participation in seminars, school exhibitions and other relevant events. They emphasized the importance of being physically on the spot and telling the prospects about Finland and the university itself, because people don't seem to know enough about Finland and the educational possibilities there.

The most important information concerning the future of UAS Seinäjoki is the one attained from the Czech and Latvian respondents, since these countries are geographically and culturally the closest ones to those where UAS Seinäjoki needs more applicants from. Unanimously attending school exhibitions and events was the proposed way of marketing, since according to the respondents; a lot of people in their region are looking for free higher education possibilities that could offer an internationally competitive degree. Promotion in sport events was also mentioned as a *perhaps good opportunity*, because a lot of young high school graduates attend these without knowing much about their future plans. Exhibitions and fairs are a good way to promote a company abroad, since it involves a direct contact to the possible customers, who attend the event for their own free will and interest. Exhibitions enable a company to give live presentations of their products and services, and at the same time gather information about the target markets. (Syrjänen & Uschanoff 2005, 30.) This is extremely important, since a unifying theme within each group was that Finland's education system and the schools themselves are not commonly promoted anywhere and not enough practical information is offered of them.

Opinions about staying in Finland were nearly alike between each group, and even comparable to results of earlier studies as well (cf. Kinnunen 2003). Everyone mentioned one fairly similar statement: "If I get a good chance to work or continue my studies, I can stay", but in reality, staying in Finland was seen rather unlikely. Vietnamese, Chinese, Czech and the Latvian students mentioned that staying is *perhaps possible*, but most likely not for the rest of their lives. Nepalese and African respondents explained wanting to stay and continue working in Finland, partly

for themselves and partly as a thank you for the possibility which they got through the free education –system, but they felt like the surroundings won't allow them to do so. They have even experienced racism of some degree, and they feel like they don't have the possibility to get a decent job here, even though some of them have an additional master's degree in their resumes already. Nothing encourages them to stay in Finland, or at least not in Seinäjoki.

Altogether, the theoretical framework supports the findings of this qualitative study. Reasons for choosing Finland were very similar to earlier studies, and since selecting UAS Seinäjoki was mainly a random pick from the list of Finnish business schools – one can only state that the school has no significant image abroad, which would attract students to apply into it. Sources of information were rather irrelevant as nothing was known about the school before applying, although it is noteworthy to mention that the agents and teachers abroad are the ones providing the list of Finnish business schools, where UAS Seinäjoki is also visible.

5.1 Reliability and validity

The usability of a research is dependable on whether the research results are considered reliable or not. Reliability depends on the quality of the work. Therefore quality is ought to be observed and controlled throughout the whole study to ensure a trustworthy outcome. (Hirsijärvi & Hurme 2001, 185.)

By reliability is meant that when studying the same person(s) twice, the same results arise. Another way of definition is that reliability is achieved when two assessors end up with similar results, or when two parallel research methods studying the same phenomenon result in equivalent outcomes. However, if admitted that human behavior is attached to a context, and varies depending on time and location, it is unlikely to achieve completely matching results with two different methods or researchers. (Hirsijärvi & Hurme 2001, 186.)

Validity refers to the authenticity of the results and analysis – is the work conducted so, that the results may be trusted and kept as a realistic portrayal of opinions of the examined persons (KvaliMOTV 2006, 3.3.1. [referred 22.5.2011])?

The quality of this particular study was controlled since the beginning, e.g. in forms of careful planning of the research method, supported with theoretical literature and testing of the methods in practice. Most importantly, discussions with the employer and thesis instructor were held rather often throughout the process to ensure functional implementation and increase chances to reach trustworthy results.

Concerning the collected data; the recorded digital audio tape was used in the analyzing process, even though the discussions were already written on paper. This was made to ensure no accurate data would get lost during the analyzing process. Additionally it helped to recognize moods, emotions and participants' reactions to one's comments. Generally all the answers during the interviews were rather straightforward and no hesitation or contradictory comments by a single person were noticed. Positive and negative feelings were freely expressed, and especially a feel of disappointment and frustration was noticeable at times when negative experiences were discussed upon. In other words, the interviewer felt like he identified the honesty in the respondents' answers. However, it is important to note, that the result of an interview is always an *outcome of the cooperation between the interviewer and the interviewee*. (Hirsijärvi & Hurme 2001, 189.)

Results of this work can be considered valid and reliable, since the examined persons took part in the interviews by their own, free will, and shared their opinions openly. The answers themselves were clearly categorizable, and previous studies of similar topics support the findings by presenting nearly equivalent results.

5.2 Utilization of the results and further studies

Considering future marketing actions, it would be necessary to conduct further studies about the proper ways of marketing in a given location, for example in Latvia and Czech. Even though the two persons from these regions gave most likely honest and valuable insights, obviously no generalization can be made out of the opinions of two respondents. But because two other groups had fairly similar opinions concerning the marketing actions, and because many of the comments around this subject support it, a careful approach on future actions may be suggested based on the findings of this work:

In order to attract more foreign applicants from certain regions (e.g. Czech, Latvia), representatives of UAS Seinäjoki simply need to go and attend any study related exhibitions / fairs / events in a country of choice, and personally tell the visitors the following things:

- 1) Seinäjoki exists, and it is possible to live and study there
- 2) One may obtain a strong, internationally valid degree
- 3) Studying there is FREE and multiple programs are available
- 4) Many other international students study there as well

It would be useful to promote the school through Finland's exotic image, since it has clearly had an influence on a prospects choice of study destination according to all the previous studies covered in the theoretical section.

In case UAS Seinäjoki wants to approach prospective Chinese students, a more detailed research is absolutely necessary. The Chinese respondent did mention the importance of Internet, country image, and the influence of parents, but according to another recent study, the choice of university is a much more complicated process for a Chinese. The study suggests that the cultural values of the Chinese influence heavily on their choice of target country for studies. For the sake of reinforcing group harmony, a Chinese person prefers to choose a country with "low corruption, and high level of honesty and fairness". Due to the same reason, the influence of parents and relatives on decisions is also considered relatively strong. Furthermore, the study mentioned that the Chinese students prefer to use agents and educational exhibitions for university enrolment, this also due to the "high context nature of the Chinese society". (Chung, Holdsworth, Yongqiang & Fam 2009, 1-3.)

An issue which arose during the interviews, that the foreign students aren't very keen on staying in Seinäjoki or Finland after their studies, might be a considerable topic for further studies. It would be useful to know what would Seinäjoki UAS, and the city itself, need to do in order to attract the students to stay in the region after completing their studies. Generally this topic has been covered pretty well in a study called "If I can find a good job after graduation, I may stay" by Kinnunen

(2003). But this is a generic nationwide study and does not provide any regional analysis.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. Forming of categories for reasons choosing Finland

Reduced sentences	Reasons (Sub-category)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I can't afford any other country - Because I knew the education is free, and that's why I came to Finland. - I think first is about the educational system, that it's free. - I was thinking about UK, but I found out their scholarship is going to raise quite a lot, so then I got info about this system (Finnish). I had to pay for the (entrance) exams, but as long as the other studies are free, I figured out that it will be just fine. - Basically first thing that comes it's free, so it's free, and you don't have to complete the cost for our studying - When I went there (consultancy), they told me about this, like Finland, Norway and Sweden have free study. 	<p><u>Free education</u></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I didn't like my country, it's like the politics are very bad there, and doing studies is hard, and... - I was really tired of my country and I 	<p><u>Home country not pleasing</u></p>

was just waiting to get out of my place.	
- I discussed with my parents, and they just told me to go to the Nordic Countries, and so I said "Okay I go there, I choose Finland."	<u>Parents</u>
- Someone of my relatives advised me to come here, so then I moved here.	<u>Relatives advised</u>
- I have a lot of friends in Finland, and they always telling me about the level of education here, that it's okay. - My former neighbor, who is now a professor in Kemi, and his brother studying in Helsinki, they said that it's good if you try here.	<u>Friend recommendation</u>
- So I was visiting some consultancies and they told me about this	<u>Consultancy</u>
- My university teacher always used to say that "if you want to go to earn into the economic [unclear], you just need to go there (Finland).	<u>Teacher</u>
- After my first degree, I thought that I need an international degree, ..	<u>International degree</u>
- I realized I had to make my first degree more stronger, and so I chose...	<u>Strengthening a degree</u>

- I heard the level of education is one of the best in the world presently here.	<u>High level of education</u>
- And the second thing is that the economy is quite good here, so to study business and economy – this is the best place to do it, I think.	<u>Good economy</u>

APPENDIX 2. Forming of categories for reasons choosing UAS Seinäjoki

Reduced sentences	Reasons (sub-category)
- One of my relatives are also living in Vaasa and they recommended me the place for me.	<u>Relatives</u>
- I also had a cousin studying here one year earlier than me, and she recommended me this place.	<u>Cousin</u>
<p>- Actually here is not my first option, because my first option was Arcada, and then Lahti. After the exam, it went so that I came to Seinäjoki.</p> <p>- Seinäjoki was not my first choice, I think it was Tampere. And since I didn't get an admission there I decided to come around (to Seinäjoki).</p> <p>- Seinäjoki was the second choice, I also applied to other schools but after the selection we came here.</p> <p>- The same</p> <p>- The same</p>	<u>Not my first choice</u>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I have a simple and honest answer. You get to choose four universities and based on our marks, I was placed into Seinäjoki. - Yeah the same, I had the same - I had chosen Arcada first and then I had Seinäjoki. After the exam I had like 3 points less from Arcada, so I was placed into Seinäjoki. - ...but Seinäjoki was actually a random choice from all the business schools, so it didn't even matter which schools I applied. 	<p><u>Random choice</u></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - My first choose was Seinäjoki! But it's the subjects that make us come here, like International business. They recommend us to go there (to Finland) and study international business. - I figured it out that this is the study, International business, where I fit in. 	<p><u>International business</u></p>